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Press Release

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Owyhee County Resident Tests Positive for West Nile Virus

An Owyhee County woman in her 40s has tested positive for West Nile virus, the first lab-confirmed human West Nile infection in 2006. The woman is recovering.

This is the sixth Idaho county to report West Nile activity in the last month and the first report from Owyhee County. The other counties reporting West Nile activity include Ada, Canyon, Elmore, Gem and Gooding counties. Last year, West Nile virus was discovered in 15 southern Idaho counties, infecting 13 people, over 100 horses and a dozen birds.

“West Nile virus can cause serious illness, so we urge people to ‘Fight the Bite’ and take precautions to avoid mosquitoes which carry the virus,” says Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, Deputy State Epidemiologist for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. She notes that last year 3,000 Americans nationwide were infected with the virus, with 119 dying from complications of the infection.

West Nile virus is usually spread through the bite of an infected mosquito and is not generally spread from person-to-person or from infected animals to people. Across the nation to date, 24 other states have reported West Nile activity to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, with three of those states recording human infections.

(more)

“About 80 percent of people who are bitten by an infected mosquito will not become sick, but others may experience a mild, flu-like illness that can include headaches, body aches and a fever,” Tengelsen says. “Although rare, the virus can lead to serious illness, especially in people over the age of 50.”

To protect themselves from mosquito bites, she advises people to:

- Insect-proof their homes by repairing or replacing screens;
- Reduce standing water on their property that provides mosquito breeding habitat, such as bird baths and decorative ponds;
- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors;
- Apply insect repellent approved by the EPA to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children;
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk; and
- Report dead birds to your local Fish and Game office.

West Nile virus does not appear to affect most animals including dogs and cats, but can cause severe illness in horses and certain species of birds. Although there is not a vaccine available for people, there are several vaccines for horses. Approximately one-third of horses which contract West Nile virus will die, so horse owners are encouraged to contact their veterinarian about vaccinating their animals. Horse owners who suspect West Nile viral infection in their animal should contact their veterinarian immediately.

Additional information about the virus is available from the Department of Health and Welfare’s web site at <http://www.westnile.idaho.gov>. The Idaho State Department of Agriculture’s Urban Pest Management program also has information available on steps to prevent home-grown mosquito infestations. This information is available on ISDA’s web site at <http://www.idahoag.us>.

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(Editors: For more information, please contact Tom Shanahan at 334-0668.)